

# Lethal Woman, Part I

In five sessions of self-defense, I went from harboring the self-image of a deflated balloon to feeling like Rambo's sister.

By Judy Labensohn

I have just finished a five-session course in self-defense.

It's not that I didn't have any defenses before the course. In fact, I had so many defenses it cost me thousands of shekels to analyze them all. But even after I understood denial, projection, repression, reaction formation, depersonalization and displacement, I still felt vulnerable, rather than empowered. Vulnerable, that is, not so much towards my internal drives, but rather towards external dangers: neighborhood rapists and drug addicts, knife wielders, purse snatchers, and just your everyday sexual harassers who grab you on buses, in elevators or in the workplace.

Also, the more I read daily newspaper articles about stabbings, burglaries, rapes and murders - the only kind of articles I read - I realized that 90 percent of the victims are women. This is not a researched figure, you understand, just an impression. But it was strong enough of an impression to motivate me to do something so I would not become a victim.

My first instinct, after the last terrorist incident in Jerusalem, was to learn how to shoot a pistol. I shared this urge with my family. After they stopped laughing, I realized that, even if I changed my name to Oakley, I might not get a license for a gun. So I had to find another way of defending myself out on the street.

The five-session self-defense course sounded ideal. It was being offered in Baka's Community Center - a four-minute walk from my house. Even though each session was 90 minutes, which is forty-five more than my attention span, I figured I could cope because I wouldn't have to sit in one place the whole time. And five sessions was about my limit for commitment.

ON THE way to the first class, I laughed. How could little 'ol' me, slowest runner in sixth grade, weakest link in the summer-camp tug-of-war chain, congenital scaredy cat who never even pushed a fly off a swing, take a course with a black-belt karate chopper? By the time I reached the gym, I knew: Who else would take such a course?

Allow me to share with you some of the gems of the self-defense course. First, you should know that Freud's list of defenses is so scanty it's embarrassing. Obviously, he never heard of the common elbow. An elbow in an attacker's face is worth three thousand doses of denial. And I bet nobody ever told you that there are more pain receptors concentrated between the shin and instep than in any other part of the body, that one good kick in the enemy's leg is more cost-effective than repression. Or that, rather than project hatred onto the aggressive object, just gouge out his eyes.

"A cool head, your own bodies, and any object near you - your purse, keys, a pen - are excellent defenses," said Arthur, our teacher. He was a slim man, sweet as honey, cool as a milk shake, but one little flick of his elbow on



your cheek could send you bowling.

"No situation is impossible to get out of," he hammered at the class of 12 - four teenagers, one man and seven women. "Every hold, every line of attack, every threat has a counter move. Except one." (He showed it to us, but I'm not telling.) "Just be aware, think, and practice."

Practice we did. I imagined a weak man, about 5 foot 4 inches tall, which is two inches taller than myself, trying to strangle me. Laughing all the while, I clobbered his arms down with my violent right arm and then before he knew what hit him, clonked his head with my nasty left elbow. Before he could regain his balance, I stepped on his left foot with the weight of an elephant, kicked him below his left knee and once he was flailing on the floor, stomped on his head and broke his nose for dessert.

It was fun. I didn't know if I was allowed to enjoy it, so I controlled my enthusiasm,

until Arthur handed out the black rubber knives for practice. "Yippee," I shouted, "knives."

We practiced stabbing each other and repelling the stabber with blocks made out of our own arms. Once my partner hit me in the eye by accident, but assured me I had nothing to worry about. She was a doctor.

WHEN I walked home from the gym after each session, I wished someone would snatch my purse or kidnap me to the nearest disco - nothing too radical, just something stimulating enough for me to practice my stuff in real time. I also imagined practicing the moves on women, to avoid stereotyping.

After two sessions, I stopped laughing when I gave elbow strikes. I started taking myself seriously. Two sessions of self-defense, it seemed, were worth more than three years of psychoanalysis, four years of counseling, five years of various short-term

therapies and a lifetime of prayer. Finally, I felt empowered. I would never be a victim.

The release of my fighting spirit was immediately and totally liberating, like no abstraction had ever been. Every time Arthur told us that every situation has its solution, I felt invincible. It didn't even matter that I didn't know the solutions. It made no difference that at home, my 11-year-old could get me down on the kitchen floor within three minutes. What mattered was that I was given permission to fight and taught the most basic techniques.

Even though fighting can be fun, the first rule of self-defense, according to Arthur, is avoidance. Running away from trouble is the first line of defense, if you truly want to survive. When you smell trouble or see it across the street, simply turn around and run the other way. Watch it on TV at night. Read about it in the morning paper. Not only is it OK to run, but, says black-belt Arthur, it is preferable over any other technique, unless you are trained, really trained, to fight.

If you decide you have no choice but to fight, then you fight for survival. Then there is no such thing as dirty fighting. Anything goes. The attacker is not a diabetic with an invalid mother at home, a long unemployment record, and three failed attempts at drug rehab who deserves your pity. Rather, he is the animal enemy. Bite, kick, scream, punch, the works. Always aim for his head or groin, preferably both at the same time, but this takes lots of practice.

For people who never served in an army or who didn't have the privilege of growing up in New York City, such a philosophy is hard to swallow. Although the New Yorkers in the class mouthed the words right along with Arthur, it took a little longer for a Midwestern suburbanite who never served in an army to accept this total rejection of Jewish *rachmones*. About 10 minutes, give or take.

The bottom line of all self-defense is to be aware, according to Arthur. I used to think I was paranoid because I look to see who is standing around me at every pedestrian crossing. And I scout the street before I walk my dog at dawn. Turns out, this is the bottom line of self-defense: awareness at all times.

My whole way of being in the world was legitimized by Arthur's self-defense course. Not only legitimized, but encouraged. Awareness is not paranoia, my friends. It is raw survival instinct.

In five sessions, I emerged from harboring the self-image of a deflated balloon to feeling like, well, if not Rambo, then his sister.

All 12 of us asked Arthur when Self-Defense II would begin. Then I told him, "If you don't market this course in every school and in every community center in the country, I'm going to kick you in the groin."

He reminded me to use this technique only when your life is in danger. Then he turned towards the door of the gym and ran. ♦